

# AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

## Press Release 995

### National Schools Reform Agreement doomed to fail-

### As all Needs Policies have foundered since 1964.

In his usual well researched fashion Trevor Cobbold from *Save Our Schools* has pinpointed the Terms of Reference definition of Equity provided by the Expert Panel reviewing the National Schools Reform Agreement as the Achilles heel of all attempts to equalise educational opportunity in Australia.

Even since the Schools Commission of 1973 all attempts to assist the disadvantaged students in Australian schools have failed – miserably. Why?

Simply because the wealthy religious schools and their bureaucracies have to be saturated with public funding largesse before a few dollars can be flung to the poor in the public sector. This has involved political terms of reference provided to panels of Educational Enquiry .

In 1973 the Schools Commission tried to put ‘equality of opportunity’ into effect by recommending wealthy schools like Kings and Xavier lose some public funding. They categorised schools A-H accordingly. The wealthy schools kicked up a fuss and were swiftly re-categorised as “needy”. None lost a penny and the State Aid rort was well and truly on.

In 2011 Gonski questioned the glaring inequalities caused by State Aid to the private sector, but was instructed that ‘no school would lose a dollar’. The result is current overfunding of private and chronic underfunding of public schools.

It is doubtful whether anything will change.

In 2023 Trevor Cobbold notes:

***The Expert Panel reviewing the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) has failed to adequately define equity goals for the next Agreement. Its Consultation Paper released last month Panel adopted a flawed definition proposed by the Productivity Commission in its report on the Agreement. The Panel must revise its definition of equity in its final report to the Government in October. Failure to do so will mean continued failure to address the massive achievement gaps between rich and poor.***

*The current NSRA conspicuously fails to provide a clearly defined equity goal. It has perpetrated different meanings and interpretations of what constitutes*

*equity in education This in turn leads to policy confusion and even contradictory approaches to improving equity. As a result many students continue to be denied an adequate education and achievement gaps between privileged and less privileged students continue. It also allows governments to avoid accountability for these failures and to misdirect funding increases to school sectors least in need.*

*To its credit, the Expert Panel has recognised this failure and has ventured a definition in its consultation paper. It has adopted the definition The Productivity Commission definition adopted by the Panel covers two distinct aims.*

*The first is to ensure schooling equips each student with the basic skills required for success in life (equity in minimum or basic skills). The second is to reduce or eliminate differences in outcomes across students with different backgrounds, experiences and needs (equity across students), particularly for the "priority equity cohorts" in the NSRA – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural, and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.*

*This definition is quite different from that proposed in the original Gonski review. It therefore felt compelled to state its view of what equity means. The Gonski Report adopted a dual equity objective which was similar to that proposed by Save Our Schools in its submission to the review. The Report said:*

*...no student in Australia should leave school without the basic skills and competencies needed to participate in the workforce and lead successful and productive lives.*

*It explained that this meant attainment of Year 12 or its equivalent as a minimum standard of education for all:*

*Australia's school system needs to help ensure that the targets for students attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualifications are met and that students leave school with the skills and capacities required to actively participate in society, and contribute to Australia's prosperity.*

*The Report also adopted a clear social equity goal. It said:*

*The panel has defined equity in schooling as ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. Equity in this sense does not mean that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes.*

*Central to the panel's definition of equity is the belief that the underlying talents and abilities of students that enable them to succeed in schooling are not distributed differently among children from different socioeconomic status, ethnic or language backgrounds, or according to where they live or go to school.*

*This dual equity goal was abandoned by the Gillard Government at the outset. It was replaced by a weak equity goal of "improving the results of disadvantaged students". Even this weak commitment was ignored by successive Coalition governments who showered Catholic and Independent schools with funding increases despite the fact that they enrol only a minority of low SES, Indigenous, remote area, and disability students.*

*The Expert Panel must re-focus on equity in education as the key education goal for the next NSRA. Unfortunately, the Productivity Commission's definition is not up to the task and will likely perpetuate the confusion about equity. There are several problems with this definition, namely:*

- Its reference to basic skills to succeed in life is too vague and does not provide an operational goal for policy makers;*
- It suggests that the social equity goal is only to remove differences in outcomes between the priority equity cohorts rather than between these groups and highly advantaged groups;*
- It is open to being interpreted as supporting equality of outcomes by all students;*
- It presents a choice between reducing **or** eliminating differences in outcomes between students of different backgrounds;*
- It excludes low socio-economic status (SES) students from the priority equity cohorts.*

*The first component of the Productivity Commission definition of equity in education recognises the need for all students to achieve a minimum standard of education. However, achieving 'basic skills' is too vague and open-ended to provide sufficient guidance for policy makers and the*

*Australian community. It fails to specify the level of education needed for all students to participate successfully in adult society.*

*The basic skills necessary for a successful life can be interpreted in several ways. For example, it could be interpreted as achieving basic literacy and numeracy skills, completing Year 10 or completing the compulsory standards of different jurisdictions which generally require completion of Year 10 and participation in education, training or employment until age 17.*

*Basic literacy and numeracy are not enough for participation in modern society. In its submission to the review, Save Our Schools proposes that the minimum standard of education that should be expected for all students is that set by the original Gonski Report, namely, that all students should complete Year 12 or an equivalent vocational certificate. Completing Year 12 involves more than basic literacy and numeracy. It involves additional knowledge and skills to participate in adult society.*

*The Productivity Commission definition is also imprecise regarding removing differences between students from different backgrounds. The definition can be interpreted as only removing differences in outcomes between the priority equity cohorts mentioned. This is not enough to be consistent with the broad definition adopted by the Gonski Report because it fails to specify that the differences to be reduced and eliminated are those between the priority equity cohorts and highly advantaged groups.*

*At present there are huge achievement gaps between high socio-economic status (SES) students and priority equity cohorts such as low SES, Indigenous and remote area students. Overcoming these differences is the fundamental challenge facing the education system because they result in one group of students having more privileged access to higher education, high income and status occupations and positions of power in society. It amounts to structural discrimination against some social groups and it contributes significantly to the social reproduction of privilege and disadvantage. It hardens social divisions and social hierarchies.*

*The wording of the Productivity Commission's definition could potentially lead to confusion and divert attention from differences in outcomes across social groups of students. In particular, the description of the second equity component as "equity across students" could be interpreted as something closer to equality of outcomes across students, which is neither a feasible nor*

*a desirable aim. Different students, even if matched by SES and other aspects of their background, will still end up with different interests and talents that lead to different outcomes. This is due to the inevitable variability of human experiences and human responses to those experiences. This is part of being human, and we should never aim for equality of outcomes – only that those outcomes are not significantly determined by systematic differences in social background. Those opposed to equity goals, for whatever reason, might try to create confusion, as they have in the past, by arguing that equality of outcomes across students is not achievable, implying that equity across social groups is equally impossible.*

*Another problem with the Productivity Commission’s definition is that it sets the social equity goal as “to reduce **or** eliminate differences in outcomes”. This implies a choice between reduction or elimination. There should not be any such choice. The social equity goal should be to “reduce **and** eliminate differences in outcomes”.*

*The Productivity Commission adopts a catch-all category of students from “educationally disadvantaged backgrounds”. This is strange because the preceding groups mentioned in the Commission’s definition are also considered as being from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. There seems to be a reluctance by the Commission and the Panel to identify low SES students as a specific equity group despite the fact that they are the biggest educationally disadvantaged group in society. Furthermore, in accepting the Commission’s definition, the Expert Panel has ignored the Minister’s statement in announcing the Panel that low SES students are one of the groups that the next NSRA will focus on to improve achievement. This disregard of the Minister’s concern to support low SES students is somewhat pointed and surprising.*

*This failure to specify the largest disadvantaged group as a priority equity cohort could result in these students being ignored or given lower priority in the allocation of school resources. For example, in its submission on the consultation paper, the National Catholic Education Commission has affirmed the Panel’s support for the Productivity Commission’s definition of equity and does not recommend any support for the learning of low SES students. It excludes low SES students from its list of additional priority cohorts were to be added to the next NSRA.*

*The Productivity Commission definition shifts the focus from “wealth, income, power or possessions” towards a narrower emphasis on parents with lower educational attainments. Parents with lower levels of education may, on average, have more limited skills to support their children through their education, less familiarity with what higher educational achievements require, and may in some cases set lower aspirations for their children. But it is also clear that parents with low incomes have limitations on how much material support, including use of books and creative toys in the early years, which can play an important role in education outcomes.*

*As a result of all these problems, Save Our Schools has recommended that the Expert Panel should define equity in education more precisely to provide a practical guide to policy formulation. It recommends a definition for inclusion in the NSRA. This consists of dual equity goals, one for all individual students and one for social groups of students.*

## **THE DOGS POSITION**

DOGS argue that basic mistake in considering educational funding arrangements in Australia does not start and end with students and their parents.

It starts with the objectives and principles behind the establishment of schools. You cannot consider concepts like ‘equality of opportunity’ or ‘equity’ unless the schools themselves have the objective of inclusiveness of all students, employees and parents. Private schools are diametrically opposed to this principle. Boosting them with not just public funding but favoured public funding is completely counterproductive if the National goal is a democratic, inclusive and economically productive one.

Only public schools which are public in purpose, outcome, access, ownership, control, sole public funding and accountability can do the job. This is common sense. The State Aid experiment of the last six decades has failed. It is time Australia bit the bullet and followed Finland – or even the lessons of its own nineteenth century history.

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